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Vernal Pool: A Participatory Art Project About Place + Precipitation

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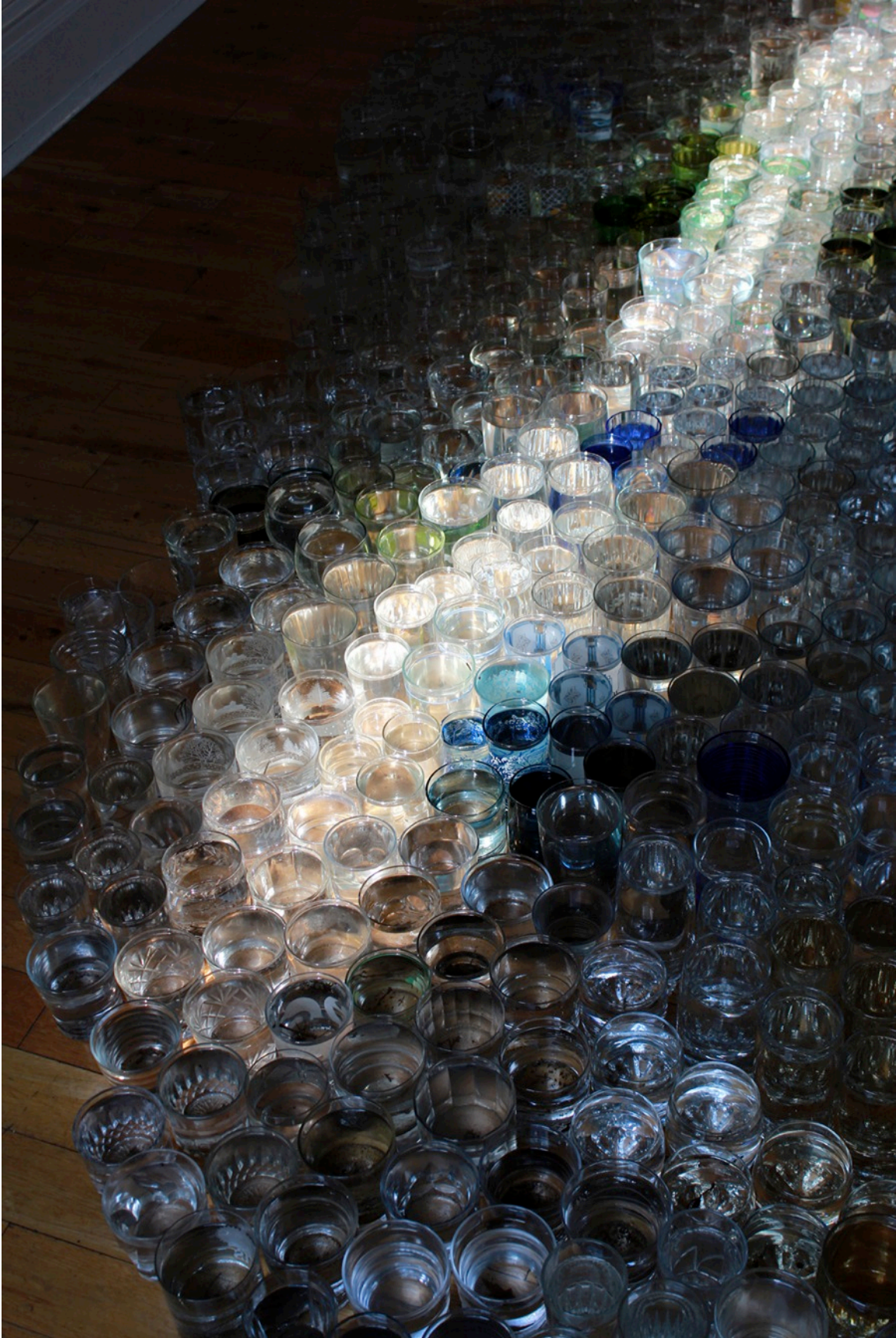
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KAREN MIRANDA ABEL
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*Vernal Pool: A Participatory Art
Project About Place + Precipitation*



Conceived and produced by Karen Miranda Abel with contributions by Jessica Marion Barr, *Vernal Pool* is an immersive, elemental water installation created as a participatory, contemplative inquiry into our transitory interrelationships with water and landscape.



From November 2013 to April 2014, 114 individuals across Canada and abroad gathered snow samples as a form of extrinsic artistic practice about place and precipitation. With the arrival of spring, the reservoir of melted snow was convened for four days at Toronto's historic Gladstone Hotel to create *Vernal Pool*.



From the Latin word *vernalis*, meaning “of or belonging to spring,” a vernal pool is an impermanent freshwater wetland that typically forms in landform depressions each April from snowmelt and rainwater, providing vital natal habitat for amphibians and aquatic insects in Ontario and across North America. The meltwater of spring is the defining event for these evanescent breeding pools, which dry up with the heat of summer until they can be resurrected at the following winter's end. *Vernal Pool* considers the origins of Earth's water and its infinite migrations through the physical processes of evaporation, condensation, precipitation, infiltration, surface run-off, and subsurface flow. Science suggests that water is as old as the Earth itself – an estimated 4.5 billion years – as virtually no new water has been introduced into the atmosphere since the planet's earliest beginnings. In this sense, the water we drink is age-old. Continuously in motion, the surface water that humans and all other freshwater-dependent organisms consume every day has been circulated from the land to the sky and back again in the form of rain and snow since the beginning of time. In observation of this perpetual movement across time and place, and our intersections with water in all its manifestations, a winter-long snow gathering practice was undertaken by participants in Canada, the United States, Germany, Hong Kong (rainwater), Italy, and Japan.



In Ontario, over 90 snow sample contributions were received from individuals as well as organizations including Blink Gallery Collective, Edward Burtynsky Studio, FIELDWORK, Ontario Science Centre, Royal Ontario Museum and the Walpole Island First Nation Heritage Centre. Notable individual Ontario contributors included Toronto Islands artist Michael Davey, writer Lorraine Johnson, and chef Jamie Kennedy. The large mason jar of still frozen snow contributed by the studio of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky was thoughtfully stored outside on the studio's window ledge by director Marcus Schubert in order to preserve its frozen state.



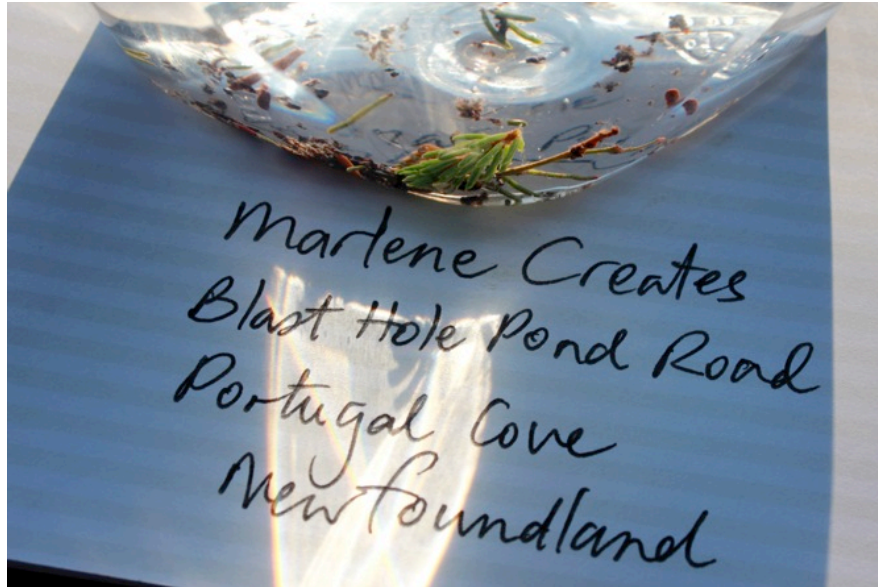
Edward Burtynsky's snow sample (Photo: Jessica Marion Barr)

Among the overseas samples received was an oolong tea bottle of pristine snowmelt collected by Marika Viger in March at the ancient Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples of Nikko (meaning “sunlight” or “sunshine”), a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the mountains of Tochigi Prefecture, Japan. The site is located within a 400-year-old cedar forest on the island of Honshu. Viger gathered snow samples from all over the site and specifically from the highest point at the Tokugawa Mausoleum, the final resting place of shogun Tokugawa Iyasu, built in 1643. The sample was personally delivered to the artists in Toronto by Viger’s sister, artist and project participant Kristine Mifsud.

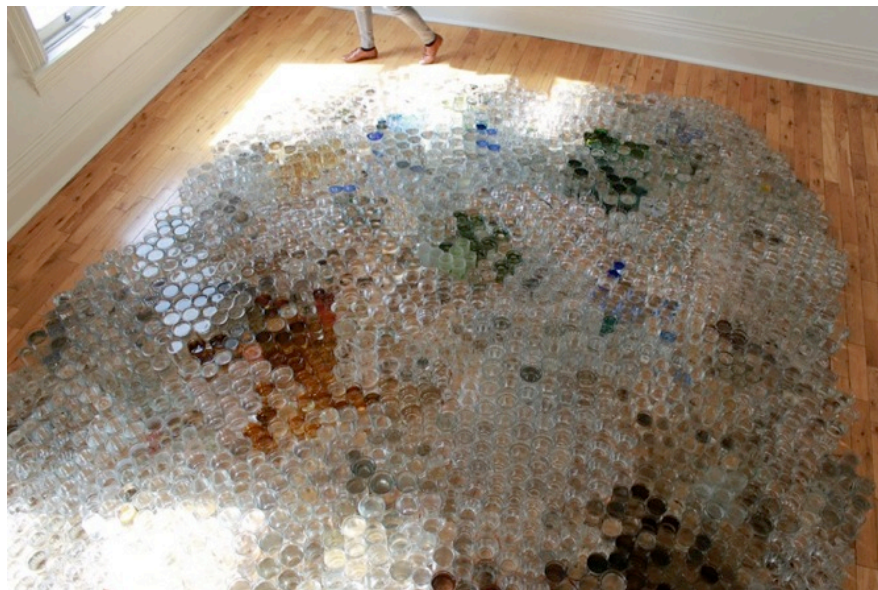


Snow gathering in Japan (Photo: Marika Viger)

Newfoundland artist Marlene Creates was an enthusiastic participant, given her career-long interest in place and her more recent work entitled *A Newfoundland Treasury of Terms for Ice and Snow* (2011 and ongoing). She contributed a vessel of snowmelt with bits of pine tree detritus from her boreal forest property, along with a small handmade booklet interpreting the various sites at which she collected snow. For example: “*March 3, 2014: Snow from the old woman fluxing her geese yesterday, Blast Hole Pond River, Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. The old woman is fluxing her geese is an expression for a light fall of snow.*”



Like a confluence of spring runoff meandering to common ground, over 600 litres of snowmelt samples referencing geographically and perceptively distinct chronicles of one (long) winter were transposed with the warmth of spring to condense and meditatively pause at a seasonal meeting place, forming a temporary water body – a kind of anthropological precipitation garden – in a gallery space at the Gladstone Hotel. Consisting of close to 2,000 pieces of salvaged glassware filled with snowmelt (and accompanying bits of organic matter), the installation evokes the translucent egg masses that amphibians lay in ephemeral wetlands each spring. A sound installation designed by Barr consisting of layered field recordings of rainfall and the spring calls of Ontario frog species (spring peepers and gray treefrogs) animated the space, drawing visitors further into the symbolic ecosystem of *Vernal Pool*.¹



¹ Hear the “Vernal Chorus” sound installation at <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss2/2/>.

Providing essential breeding habitat for many species, including the endangered Jefferson salamander, vernal pools are sensitive communities that can easily fall prey to the alterations of the land caused by agriculture and development. Visitors to the exhibition expressed interest and concern for these lesser-known phenomena, and a few shared the connections they made between the manifestation of the water they were seeing in the installation and other forms of water upon which we depend in various seasons and at various times in our lives.

In this vein, a most personal connection was the parallel between the conception, planning, and execution of *Vernal Pool* and the conception, gestation, birth, and “fourth trimester” of Barr’s son, who was born in January 2014, shortly after an ice storm brought Toronto to a near-standstill. During the unfolding of both the project and pregnancy, the artists noted connections to water: during her pregnancy, Barr enjoyed swimming in various Ontario lakes as well as in the Mediterranean Sea; a good portion of her labour was spent in warm water; and shortly after the birth she discovered that her baby was delighted by splashing and floating in the bath.



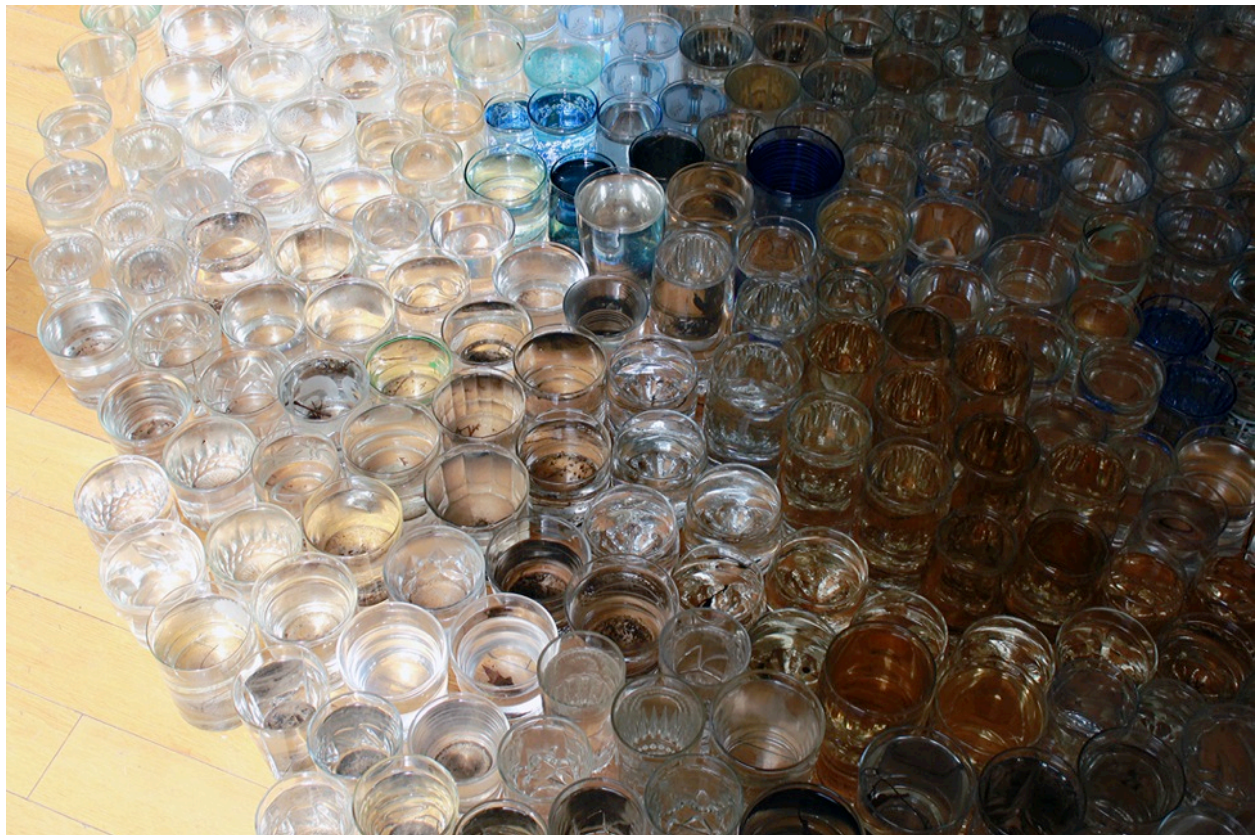
Snow gathering on frozen Lake Simcoe outside the Dawes-Barr family cottage (Photo: Jessica Marion Barr)

Water and fertility feature prominently in the final chapter of Naomi Klein's new book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, in which she writes of her visits to the site of the BP oil spill:

Spring is the beginning of spawning season on the Gulf Coast and [Klein's guide Jonathan] Henderson knew that these marshes were teeming with nearly invisible zooplankton and tiny juveniles that would develop into adult shrimp, oysters, crabs, and fin fish. In these fragile weeks and months, the marsh grass acts as an aquatic incubator, providing nutrients and protection from predators. "Everything is born in these wetlands," he said. [...]

As our boat rocked in that terrible place – the sky buzzing with Black Hawk helicopters and snowy white egrets – I had the distinct feeling that we were suspended not in water but in amniotic fluid. (425-27)

While vernal pools are distinct from gulf marshlands, they serve a similar gestational purpose, and are similarly vulnerable to the ravages of environmental contamination. *Vernal Pool* called attention to our intimate (yet global), multifaceted, life-long, and life-giving connections with water.



The recipient of the 2014 Jury's Choice Award and the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects/GROUND Award, *Vernal Pool* was exhibited as part of *Gladstone Grow Op: Exploring Landscape and Place* in April 2014. Curated by landscape architect Victoria Taylor, *Grow Op* is

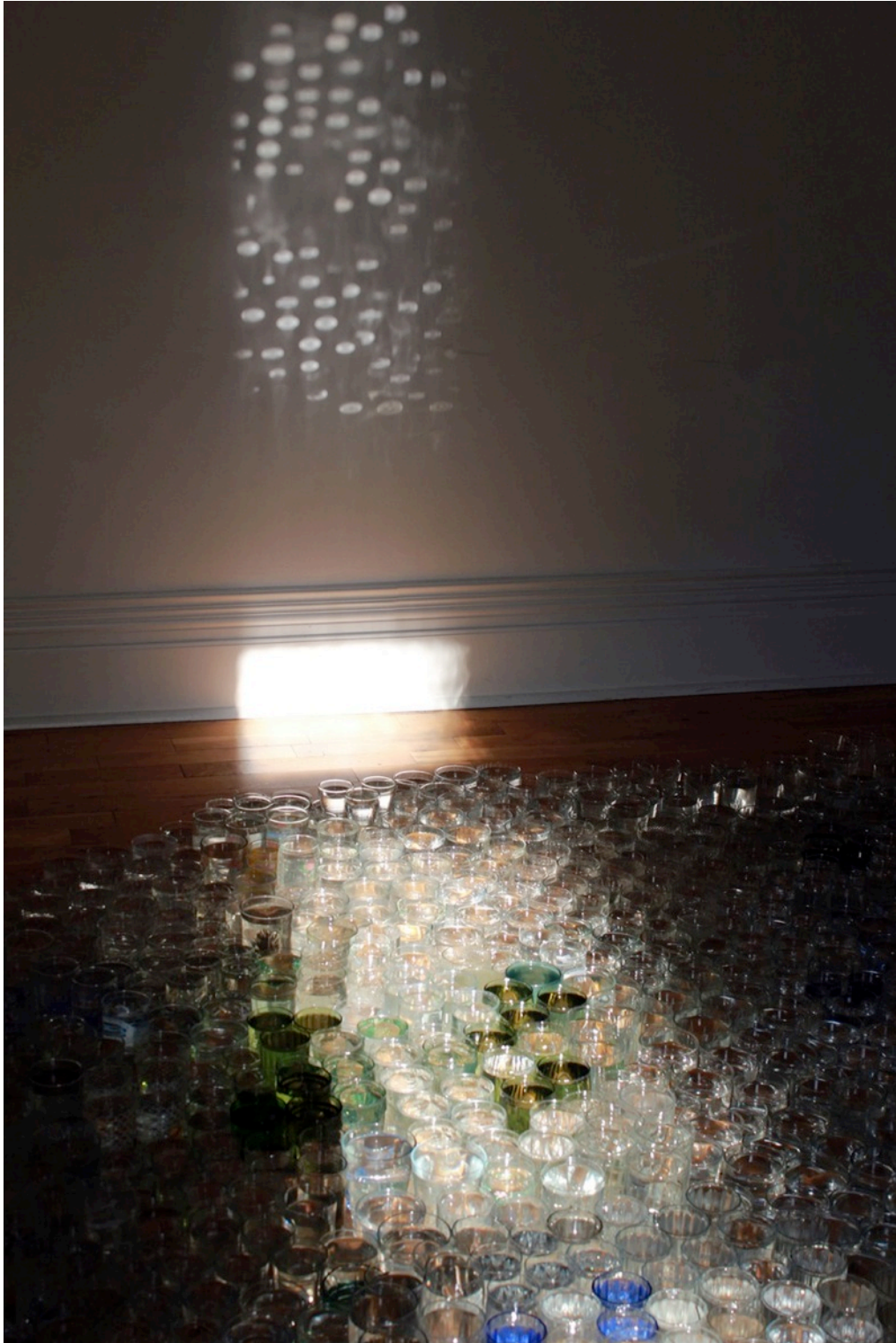
the Gladstone Hotel's annual alternative landscape and urban design event, celebrating innovative ideas and conceptual responses to sustainable placemaking across a broad range of creative practices.

On April 27, 2014, the last day of the exhibition, visitors were invited to accept jars of *Vernal Pool* snowmelt to water urban gardens in the city. Approximately 20 visitors came to participate in the snowmelt dissemination process, including Gladstone Hotel Developer and President Christina Zeidler.



Project participants Julia Patterson (pictured) and Joanne Doucette returning *Vernal Pool* water to their Toronto garden
(Photo: Joanne Doucette)

During the summer of 2014, the remaining melted snow was restored to the earth by the artists and project participants through a collective watering of gardens and urban greenspaces in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, honouring the water cycle, and further reminding us of the interrelationships between the elements of life and art practice.



Work Cited

Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. Print.

KAREN MIRANDA ABEL is a Canadian artist and naturalist based in Toronto. She creates site-sensitive installation and public art works that consider, engage, and accommodate 21st century urban ecology and biodiversity. Concerned with ephemera and “slow art” processes, Abel is interested in contributing to a culture of ecology through research-intensive season and time-based practices. She holds an interdisciplinary Master in Environmental Studies from York University in environmental art practice, cultural production, and community art. Abel has realized art gardens and permanent ecological art projects supported by the Ontario Arts Council through partnerships with the Ontario Science Centre and Walpole Island First Nation. In 2013 and 2014, she was the recipient of the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects/ GROUND Award. Visit Karen Miranda Abel’s website at karenmirandaabel.com.

JESSICA MARION BARR is a Toronto artist, educator, and Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University. Her interdisciplinary practice incorporates artmaking, research, and pedagogy, focusing on ecological elegies. Jessica teaches courses, gives talks, and leads workshops on ecologically-engaged art. Images of her artwork and accompanying texts have been published in *The Brock Review* and *The Goose*. She has recently exhibited work at the Gladstone Hotel (Toronto); World of Threads Festival (Oakville); Wall Space Gallery (Ottawa); FINA Gallery, University of British Columbia (Kelowna, BC); Hart House (University of Toronto); and Union Gallery, The Artel, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, and the Ban Righ Centre (all in Kingston, ON). Jessica’s 2013 Nuit Blanche (Toronto) project *Indicator* was included in NOW Magazine’s Critics’ Picks.

Photographs by Karen Miranda Abel except where noted.

Visit the *Vernal Pool* project gallery for more images and information:
www.vernal-pool.tumblr.com.